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SUBJECT: GOR PULLOUT FROM CIS SANCTIONS AGAINST ABKHAZIA

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Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells. Reasons 1.4 (B/D)

11. (C) Summary: In a March 6 statement, the MFA announced that the GOR would no longer honor the CIS sanctions against Abkhazia. The statement justified the move by detailing the changed situation in Abkhazia since signing of the sanctions agreement in 1996. Consequently, the sanctions regime "lost its meaning, while only keeping Abkhazia in isolation and preventing its economic recovery." GOR officials insisted that the change in policy was a "humanitarian" measure, which does not challenge Georgia's territorial integrity. They also stressed that it had been planned for some time, following the Group of Friends' recommendation for the lifting of the sanctions in Geneva in February 2007, and was not a counter-measure to the Kosovo UDI. The officials claimed that Putin previewed the GOR plan with Saakashvili during their February 21 meeting on the margins of the CIS informal summit in Moscow. With the Abkhaz March 6 release of detained journalists, MFA officials told us it was now the GOG's turn to take positive steps for reconciliation. Russia's steps to normalize relations with Abkhazia are part of an all-but recognition policy that GOR officials signaled was coming in the wake of Kosovo's recognition. End summary.

12. (C) As the GOR had earlier warned, the MFA issued a statement on March 6, announcing Russia's decision to pull out from the 1996 CIS agreement on sanctions against Abkhazia. The statement, detailing the change in/around Abkhazia, said that the GOR signed the agreement to motivate the Abkhaz to promote the speedy return of refugees. The statement maintained that the Abkhaz have done their part both for the repatriation of refugees and the negotiation process, while the Georgians have obstructed both paths with their difficult refugee registration procedures and refusal to implement UN and Friends' recommendations for the resumption of the negotiation process. In response to our concerns, MFA Fourth CIS Department Deputy Director and the main author of the MFA statement Dmitriy Tarabrin insisted that the situation in Abkhazia required such a move, underscoring the following points:

-- "Dramatic changes" in the situation necessitated the GOR move;

-- The GOR plan to pull out from the CIS sanctions regime should not be a surprise; the plan had been known and shared with Saakashvili during the February 21 bilateral meeting on the margins of the CIS Informal Summit (ref);

-- The intent is "humanitarian" as the sanctions regime keeps Abkhazia in isolation, while preventing it from economic recovery;

-- The pullout does not challenge Georgia's territorial integrity and should not be linked with the Kosovo UDI;

-- The GOR is not canceling the agreement, thus is in no way in violation of international laws; other CIS countries have a right to decide whether they would stay with the sanctions regime or pull out (the MFA statement, however, encourages other CIS countries to take a similar step).

Tarabrin reaffirmed that the GOR is studying many different models including Taiwan, with which the U.S. has a full range of relations, while keeping its relationship with China intact.

13. (C) GOR Special Envoy to the Abkhazia conflict Vladislav Chernov told us March 7 that the GOR announcement should not be news to anyone because it was an "old story." Per Chernov, the GOR started the process to pull out from the sanctions regime following the February 2007 Group of Friends meeting in Geneva, where the lifting of the sanctions was recommended as part of confidence-building measures. He said, "As you know, the GOR bureaucracy does not move that fast, with little demonstrated tendency to make a quick decision." Chernov echoed Tarabrin's position, saying that despite the timing, which may lend itself to the linkage with the Kosovo UDI, the decision was in the making for over a year.

14. (C) Chernov argued that the suggestion for the abolition of the sanctions regime should have come from the Georgian side. Instead, the GOG has made no positive step toward reconciliation, while insisting on calling the Abkhaz "separatists." Chernov thought that the Abkhaz side had done its part, including the March 6 release of the detained Georgian journalists. In contrast, the Georgians strengthened forces along the "border," and reinforced the "youth camp" (located 700 meters from the "border") with over-30-year-old, armed men, while Saakashvili called UNSYG's recommendation to disband the camp, "amoral and stupid." Chernov requested that the USG advise the GOG to exercise more restraint and less provocation.

15. (C) Comment: Notwithstanding GOR statements, its move to lift sanctions is very much in line with Russian efforts to recalibrate its relations with the frozen conflict territories in the wake of Western recognition of Kosovo. As forewarned, the Russians have moved closes to - but stopped short of - recognition of Abkhazia, and we expect further refinements of its all-but recognition of Abkhazia in the months to come.
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